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ABSTRACT

Academic reference librarians can enhance the campus cultural diversity of colleges and universities by displaying sensitivity at the reference desk; understanding multicultural group behaviors; avoiding stereotyped attitudes; appreciating a wide range of cognitive style differences; striving to make multicultural students feel comfortable; retaining an appreciation of gender and racial points of view; understanding the need for end-user training tailored to multi-ethnic users for the various computer systems now located in libraries and essential for research; showing that they do not necessarily always expect perfect English from students; possessing personal interaction skills; and encouraging an understanding of the importance of cultural diversity in academic settings. In addition to reference desk interaction, librarians also have opportunities to enhance cultural diversity through bibliographic instruction, academic committee work, outreach activities, summer enrichment programs, literacy advocacy, intern recruitment, and informal mentoring. A tangential benefit of the successful application of these activities is the awareness that preservation of our nation's cultural heritage is an essential library role. (KRN)

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CAN ACADEMIC REFERENCE LIBRARIANS ENHANCE THE CULTURAL DIVERSITY OF THE NATION'S COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES?

David Wilkinson

Introduction

Can academic reference librarians substantially enhance campus cultural diversity? Can they do this through their unique role providing reference service to, and interacting with, underrepresented groups in all disciplines? Can the successful experience of librarians in a state as culturally diverse as California be shared with benefit with the Nation as a whole? I believe the answer to these questions is unequivocally yes.

Academic librarians can do this by: always displaying sensitivity at the reference desk, maintaining an understanding of multicultural group behaviors, avoiding stereotyped attitudes about abilities and achievements of students, appreciating a wide range of cognitive style differences, striving to make multicultural students always feel comfortable both on campus and within the library, retaining an appreciation of gender and racial points-of-view, understanding the need for end-user training tailored to multi-ethnic users for the various computer systems now located in libraries and essential for research, showing that we do not necessarily always expect perfect English from our students, possessing applicable personal interaction skills, and encouraging an understanding of the overall importance of cultural diversity in academic settings. A tangential benefit of the successful application of these attributes in California will also contribute to an awareness that preservation of our Nation's cultural heritage is an essential role of the library sector.

Experiences and Skills

The environment provided academic librarians at universities and colleges having culturally rich and distinctly varied student bodies bestows unique opportunities. On a foundation of a strong public service orientation this can provide librarians with unusual opportunities for interaction, consensus building, and appreciation of cultural pluralism. California has some of the most culturally varied universities and colleges in the Nation and stands ready to share its experience with the Nation at large. For example the ethnic representation of my own California State University Los Angeles (Cal State LA) student body of 26,000 total students is: 31% white, 29% Asian, 28% Hispanic, 11% black, and 1% Native American. This environmental experience provides an academic reference librarian the opportunity to contribute to and enhance cultural diversity in at least fifteen ways on a daily basis through:

1. **Reference Desk Interaction** and rapport serving peoples of all nationalities in a unique face-to-face and one-to-one environment. Serving patrons in a manner that contributes to a

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cross-national understanding of the research process and information flow patterns encourages respect for cultural diversity.

2. **Sensitivity** to different cultures, cognitive style factors, and encouraging respect for appreciation of a student's individual culture. Librarians are perhaps unique in that they have the opportunity to get to know student majoring in all areas of the curriculum on a personal level in an informal relaxed environment.

3. **Public Relations Role** functioning and the realization that a reference librarian may be the only individual that prospective new students meet when visiting a college or university campus for the very first time. Thus, a desirable campus first impression engendered by a reference librarian may indirectly contribute to enlarging the pool of prospective underrepresented students.

4. **Bibliographic Instruction** activities regularly presenting library classroom instruction to the diverse groups that comprise a campus such as Cal State LA. Bibliographic instruction is formal classroom instruction in how to use the library and its varied resources, and has expanded rapidly in recent years. By occurring in a classroom setting and role somewhat similar to that of teaching faculty, librarians come to understand cultural determinants of cognitive style. Library faculty are thus aware of the importance of teaching library critical thinking skills appropriate to, and applicable across, all areas of the curriculum.

5. **End-User Computerized Instruction** focusing on serving underserved populations with culturally relevant research strategies, examples, and techniques. Student self-proficiency in computerized access and searching techniques is essential during the current information explosion era. Libraries can no long collect all available materials on any one subject and are by necessity elevating themselves to "library without walls" operational status with an emphasis on end-user access.

6. **Academic Committee Work** which can deal with issues ranging at the campus level from enrichment program planning to special efforts at the library level to provide service to underserved user populations. In many cases in California, including the twenty campus California State University System, academic reference librarians are faculty members with campus governance obligations. An important skill in committee service functioning is consensus building and diplomacy, characteristics many librarians possess through their role in dealing with the public on a daily basis.

7. **Outreach Activities** which may include providing students of multicultural "feeder" community colleges and high schools with in-depth transition program-related library instruction. A

measure of aptitude in this area would be intensive efforts serving potential transfer students of local community colleges having high underrepresented enrollments, such as Southern California's East Los Angeles Community College.

8. **Summer Enrichment and Transition Program** involvement including efforts to serve pre-freshmen students with specialized summer immersion and enrichment programs, such as the summer bridge program offered in the Cal State system. These activities are enhanced by the fact that librarians are generally perceived as willing to help and be of assistance.

9. **Literacy Advocacy** including devising recommended solutions to a functional illiteracy rate of 40% of America's minority teenagers, a high school drop out rate of 40-50% compared with the general population, and generally low reading proficiency skill levels. Developing responses to the challenge of improving information literacy is a complimentary goal.

10. **Intern Recruitment** including recruitment of minority populations as measured by success in recruiting library interns from underrepresented groups over the last few years.

11. **Related Activities** ranging from providing library administrative research support on transition program and enrichment program topics to presenting campus student orientations tailored to multicultural users.

12. **Maintaining an Awareness of Reference and Other Sources** providing information and research of interest to the Nation's major ethnic and cultural groups as well as access to resources covering the full range of multicultural and international topics.

13. **Campus Climate Enhancement** contributions that make minority students feel comfortable while visiting and residing on campus. On the one hand, the university as an institution needs to know its students to monitor and prevent an inhospitable climate. On the other, faculty members need to know students on a more personal basis to foster and facilitate a growth of mutual understanding and respect for the cultural groups that presently and may potentially define our campus communities.

14. **Informal Mentoring Role** functioning bearing in mind that the librarian is an integral member of the last line of defense for academically at-risk students. Assisting students overcome weak academic backgrounds, cultural shock, and English deficiencies are all arenas in which librarians can assist. Underrepresented students may also need to be consciously encouraged to get involved in the broader life of the campus community to gain confidence.

15. **Librarian-Technology Transfer** facilitating through assisting with the application of technologies that have contribution potential for enhancing cultural diversity, for example computerized systems and distance learning technologies that transcend time, place, and cultural differences.

The Academic Reference Librarian's Understanding of the Importance of Cultural Diversity

Those of us in the higher education sector can see the tremendous importance and long term implications of cultural diversity in California as a precursor to the Nation as a whole. The elements of demographic change that provide unprecedented opportunities for all academic institutions include the influx of new populations, increase of native-born groups, and the growth of minority populations. The academic librarian knows that cultural diversity has relevance in many contexts and a selective listing would recognize that cultural diversity is important:

A. as a key component in the pursuit of academic excellence for colleges and universities. Diversity is the fundamental and essential prerequisite for academic discourse. Contemporary society from a "global village" perspective can only be enhanced when varied groups have the opportunity to engage in meaningful debate. This process serves to both expand global understanding and provide opportunities for sharing international experiences.

B. to ensure a multicultural democracy. It is essential that the active electorate reflects the diversity of contemporary society. Unfortunately, many of the electorate's potential participants do not yet possess the skills necessary to engage in meaningful critiques of the political events of the day. The role of higher education in preventing effective disenfranchisement of a significant portion of the population can not be underestimated.

C. to meet expanding community needs for international skills in trade and in the workplace. In addition to mastery of linguistic skills, understanding of cultural influences on: value systems, motivation, and, on personality and life styles need to be adequately understood. Also important is the necessity to recognize the importance of meeting the Nation's needs for trained bilingual personnel. These contributions can help the US recover its competitive edge in the global marketplace as well as develop essential intellectual capital necessary for the coming decades. Furthermore, such an understanding is essential to an optimal functioning workplace interacting in the larger arena of foreign trade.

D. to assist members of our society to understand the role of the self in relation to the other. This can be seen as a means of neutralizing the tendency in American society toward self-absorption and lack of concern for the common good. It has been observed by many that awareness of other cultures helps us to see eccentricities in the way in which we lead our own lives and

enables us to appreciate the importance of diversity in improving human quality of life.

E. to expedite the need to involve substantial portions of the population in the basic societal changes now taking place. Our Nation can not risk allowing the higher education segment and the elementary secondary education sector to fail in enrolling students from the most rapidly growing groups. Lack of success in this effort would result in failure of the Nation's economic and social structures within a very short time. The window of opportunity now open to higher education to contribute to allowing underrepresented students to overcome economic adversity has a short time frame.

F. because fundamental societal changes, demographic shifts, and resultant legislative responses effectively mandate that it be so. For example, at the community college level California's Assembly Bill 1725 substantially affects the California Community College system and may be a precursor of changes to come in the public undergraduate and graduate system. AB 1725 is currently being implemented and requires fundamental changes in institutional mission and governance of community colleges. Designed with demographic trends in mind it moves away from an elementary-secondary education funding mechanism to a more university pattern of funding. This "holistic restructuring" is the most fundamental reorganization effort ever applied to the California community college system or any educational system of its size.

Conclusion

It has been said that the need to open the American mind to greater cultural diversity will not and can not go away. The specific experiences enjoyed by academic librarians in California's multicultural academic library environments and their resultant personal skills development complement an understanding of the central importance of cultural diversity in an academic setting.

Public universities such as the California State University System have the responsibility to be leaders in providing education to students of all constituent groups. To this end academic librarians are active participants in this endeavor who can not risk being left behind. It is the unique inter-disciplinary perspective of the academic librarian that contributes to an ability to increase library and research service levels to women, minorities, and persons of color. By so doing California's academic librarians must and will make their own unique contribution at both the state and national levels to enhancing and engendering overall respect for cultural diversity.

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